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To: varmus@nih.gov

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Status: RO

Dear Harold,

My overall impression of your well-written proposal is excitement and awe. At first I could not tell whether I was witnessing Gutenberg's invention of movable type or the Visigoths sacking Rome, but either way things will change. I have some concerns and observations but first I would say that as we start down the path there will be adaptations and opportunities that will arise that will mold this effort. Therefore, not everything can be anticipated or should be.

My major concern is that desire for a certain metric to evaluate scientists will actually increase the influence of the high profile journals (HPJs) in the short run. In the long run Gresham's law will prevail and the cheap will drive out the dear. I worry that there will initially be a snobbery promulgated by the journals that do not participate and this may be most of them. We need good editors and money to help make the electronic forms more competitive.

I must admit that I have no idea of how to support these electronic journals. As they destroy the parasitic publishing industry, would it be acceptable for NIH to subsidize the electronic forms; after all they will be facilitating the spread of science and lowering costs that are indirectly paid by NIH. You have not really addressed archiving. Would this information be available in 20 years for those few scholars who want to look back? Could they be printed on acid free paper and stored in a half dozen locations? I wonder whether guides to the literature will emerge with the same negative impact as some of the HPJs.

In your argument for the ebiomed you could probably have said more about the stylistic influences of the current journals. Everything today has to tell a story like the NY Times. Sometimes mere observations need to be published. Sometimes interesting and uncharacterized observations should accompany well worked out stories and yet ruthless editors cut these potential leads out. This would seem to be a strong point of the need for ebiomed, the current literature does not reflect science. As life imitates art, there is a negative effect on science itself probably discouraging risky forays; because unless the data makes a neat story there will be nothing published. Somehow the true costs of cutting out data or the discouragement to discussion needs to be brought out better.

You missed an opportunity for evaluating the economic costs of the current process. I have no idea how much it is. This would have to include the savings to individuals, the savings in page charges, and the savings to libraries. You also could stress more the democratizing affect of world-wide availability.

Finally there will be an effect on libraries (an effect already felt). They will increasingly be repositories of the oldest journals. They

Yes

← 1 much so!

Good point.  
(add)

Hard to do!

need not be centrally located, or elegantly constructed, they will house old and rare manuscripts. What a loss. Of course with the current journal publishing system they will sink under the weight of paper.

I do see something lost in the general skimming of journals that we all do. If all that is left is Cell to skim we might be creating big problems. I think some thought should go into a paper journal that reprints some long abstracts of articles appearing in the electronic literature.

As you can see I am enthusiastic. This proposal has the potential of removing the hassle of publication. It will force us all to read papers to decide on someone's worth. It will speed up publication but more than that it will remove the unfairness of the HPJs. I am sure I will not write more papers or take less time writing them; I will spend much less time conforming to stupid styles of journals and answering blatantly stupid critiques. I think it is possible that I would be more wordy but it may also stimulate more thoughtful and elegantly written reviews. I for one am not worried about garbage in the secondary literature. This literature will be for the specialist who will know garbage from truth.

Most of my concerns are the short run. Will the existing journals help you in the transition? That is important. If you can still publish in JCB and JBC and G&D in paper and still partake in widespread electronic broadcasting-wonderful. But these journals will be committing economic suicide and some institutions, societies, and private companies depend on that income. If this starts off as only the secondary mode or as a very low profile event it will be a stigma to publish there. Will you get in trouble with competing with the private sector? Once we get to first base we are home. This transition is what will take thought and planning. Sorry to be so long winded but this is the electronic age. Good work!

Marc